DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 412 540 CS 216 020

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TITLE	Handwriting in America: A Cultural History.
ISBN	ISBN-0-300-06477-2
PUB DATE	1996-00-00
NOTE	258p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Yale University Press, P.O. Box 209040, New Haven, CT 06520 ($30).
PUB TYPE	Books (010) -- Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	Document Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	*Cultural Context; Educational History; Elementary Education; *Handwriting; Personality; *Self Expression; Sex Differences; *Social History; *United States History
IDENTIFIERS	*Cultural Studies; Palmer Handwriting Method

ABSTRACT

This book, a history of handwriting in America ranging from colonial times to the present, explores the shifting functions and meanings of handwriting in this country. Script emerged in the 18th century as a medium intimately associated with the self, in contrast to the impersonality of print. Just what kind of self would be defined or revealed in script was debated in the context of changing economic and social realities, definitions of manhood and womanhood, and concepts of mind and body. The parties to these disputes were writing masters who used penmanship training to form and discipline students' character, scientific experts who chalked up variations in script to mere physiological idiosyncrasy, and autograph collectors and handwriting analysts who celebrated signatures that broke copybook rules as marks of personality, revealing the uniqueness of the self. There is extensive material in the book on America's handwriting instructors, including A.N. Palmer, whose method, developed in the 1880s, endured in schools for so many years--Palmer initially pushed his method as a "plain and rapid style...adapted to the rush of business." The book concludes that, in current times, when handwriting skills seem altogether obsolete and are not even taught in many schools, calligraphy revivals and calls for old-fashioned penmanship training reflect nostalgia and the rejection of modernity. (NKA)

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